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ABSTRACT

Child-rearing is still the culturally-prescribed norm for providing security for oneself in old age. Since most research on aging presumes marriage and parenthood, relatively little is known about the alternative means by which childless older people provide for themselves in their old age. Fourteen of 50 older participants in a two-year study examining the cultural mechanisms by which they gain support from their interpersonal networks were childless. Case studies of two childless older men from the subsample who were on opposite ends of a continuum of security and obligation were used to illustrate the processes by which alternative sources of support were created. The quality of support received in old age was dependent on the use of resources to cultivate relationships over time. Obligation was built through continuous reciprocal exchanges and by the giving of significant gifts. Operation of these cultural mechanisms and variations in their effectiveness was especially apparent in the situations of childless older people, who used their resources to obligate those in tenuous relationship to them. The results suggest that an examination of the strategies used by childless older people provides insight into the general issue of the development of security in old age over a lifetime. (Author/NRB)

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When There Are No Children:
Two Childless Old Men Respond to Old Age

Presented at the 1981 Annual Meeting of
The Gerontological Society
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The rearing of children is still the culturally-prescribed norm for providing security for oneself in old age. There is a strong normative consensus that parent and child do not abandon one another and the proscription that a child should do all he or she can if a parent is old and sick. While this cultural ideal does not provide a foolproof form of social insurance in our mobile, changing society, a majority of people still follow this pattern for providing for themselves in their later years (Wilder, 1972; Sussman & Burchinal, 1962).

But what of the elderly who, for whatever reason, have no children? Today there are five million childless older Americans, or about 20% of the population over 65 (Treas, 1977). In the widely held "social myth" of family abandonment of the elderly (Shanas, 1979), the childless elderly are often assumed to be the most isolated and vulnerable. While it is a fact that a disproportionate number of childless and unmarried persons are institutionalized (Brody, 1977; Townsend, 1963), this fact may not accurately reflect the range of circumstances of this significant subgroup of the elderly. Since most research on aging presumes marriage and parenthood, we know relatively little about the alternative means by which childless older people provide for themselves in their old age.

This paper attempts to bridge this gap in our knowledge by examining a number of questions about this group of elderly. How do decisions and events in the early or middle years of life affect security in old age by diverting people from the usual pattern of marriage and the family? What happens to individuals who have been unable to follow the "normal" patterns? What are their available alternatives? To what extent can they compensate? Does the larger community assume any responsibility for these old people?

The answers to these questions not only would shed light on the circumstances of childless older people, but would provide insight into the general issue of how security in old age is created over the life span.

This paper explores how being childless in our society, whether by choice or chance, affects security in old age. The analysis examines several intertwined issues affecting childless older people: 1) the alternatives to the rearing of children, particularly the cultural strategies based on reciprocity, which can be used to create obligation with people in other relationships within the personal network; 2) the use of these strategies to create an image of oneself as a worthy older person; 3) the means by which older people's claims on those obligated to them are reinforced by the larger community. The paper's conclusion raises the question of whether the process of creating security in old age differs significantly between those with children and those without.

The Ethnographic Background

The data for this analysis are drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork among older people living in and around a southern United States city. The research objective was to describe their support networks and the cultural rules underlying the "helping out" that takes place in these networks. The methods used were intensive open-ended interviews and participant observation.[1]

Fifty people between the ages of 55 and 83 were chosen, using non-probability sampling techniques, as informants. Most grew up in rural communities and migrated to the city in early adulthood, although a few worked in the city during their middle years and retired to their rural communities of origin. They are stable residents, 78 percent having lived in the same general area or neighborhood for 30 years or more. For all but a few of the people observed,

the personal network of kin, friends, and neighbors is a major source of day-to-day help. Support in these networks revolves around the provision of goods and services that contribute to the daily management of households, such as cleaning, preparing meals, making repairs, doing yardwork, and providing transportation to and from needed services. Usually older people contribute to as much as they receive from their networks, until advanced old age forces them to depend on others.

For the majority, by far the deepest relationships, both emotionally and materially, are with their grown children. Seventy-two percent (N=36) of the people of this study have one or more grown children with whom they have significant regular contact. (Counted among this number are five people who adopted or fostered young children, raising them as their own, one common alternative for the childless.) For the purpose of this analysis, fourteen of the fifty people are considered childless. Eleven of them never had children of their own, and three had biological children or stepchildren whom they did not rear. Observations of the situations of this childless subsample form the basis for the analysis.

The Creation of Security

The amount of security in old age varies according to many factors beyond most people's control, such as available material and financial resources and number of close kin living nearby. However, in part, security in old age can be influenced by the manner in which personal resources are managed over time. (Security, for the purpose of this discussion, is defined as the degree to which others within the personal network are obligated and responsive to the needs of an older person.) According to an individual's lifelong preferences for autonomy or intimacy, cultural exchange strategies can be interpreted differently to create varying degrees of involvement with others.

Three concepts are helpful for analyzing how the individual's management of resources over time contributes to the level of security in old age. The first concept is the exchange reputation, that is, how worthy that person is to make claims on others, if need be. This reputation is built through exchanges with others. Related to this is the social visibility of the older person, that is, how well the person is known in his/her particular sphere of social interaction, and how much opportunity others have to assess his/her needs and respond to them. The third crucial concept is social accountability of helpers; the degree to which the helpers' performances are evaluated by their social peers and pressure brought to bear on them to honor their commitments to the older person.

One of the major means of creating an exchange reputation is through involvement in the process of reciprocal exchange within the personal network. Unspoken, but nevertheless widely-shared cultural rules govern how these excnanges are conducted and the way that participants define their expectations of one another.

The most basic rule used by informants of this study is that a person who accepts a favor must eventually repay. Return of a favor implies a willingness to continue the exchanges and invest in a sense of mutual obligation. Two types of exchange strategies, deferred and immediate, are based on this rule; each can be used to signal the degree of personal commitment desired in a relationship. Most people build obligation between themselves and their helpers (whether kin or non-kin) using the deferred strategy. In this strategy, gifts or services are offered with no specified terms of repayment. The medium of exchange is usually highly personal (for example, the giving of surplus garden produce to a neighbor). Covert reckoning is kept, and the

receiver remains obligated until repayment is made. As the opportunity or need arises, reciprocity occurs (the neighbor sends over some food or lends a tool). This manner of giving and receiving invites further commitment. Delayed repayment compels participants to trust one another.

Usually such exchanges are balanced over the short term, but it is possible to build up "credit" by providing significant gifts to others without expectation of repayment for a long time. For instance, a neighbor may carry meals to a sick neighbor during a prolonged illness. For those with children, an effective way of building credit is by helping children "get started." During mid-life, while parents are still working and have their own incomes, they often help their young adult children get established, by paying for their educations, making the down payment on a first home, buying a large household appliance, or some other large gift for which no immediate reciprocation is demanded. However, both giver and recipient are aware that there is obligation in these circumstances. Those accepting these significant gifts become strongily obligated to their benefactors.

On the other hand, in situations where no future commitment is desired, parties generally use the immediate strategy of exchange. Repayment is made at once, in exact equivalent, using an impersonal medium ("Drive me to the airport and I'll pay for your gas"). These sorts of exchanges are clearly instrumental, and carry no further obligation. Besides being the means to an end, immediate exchange can also be used as a devise for signaling to others that social distance is desired. Most people use immediate exchange on those occasions when they wish to avoid further entanglement (for instance to short-circuit a relationship with a person who is known "to take advantage" of others). Choice of either the deferred or immediate strategy depends on the degree of personal commitment desired by one or both parties in a relationship.

Social visibility, the second factor in the creation of security involves the degree to which an older person's needs are known to others. Social visibility is closely tied to one's reputation as an exchange partner. Through the exchange process, people's lives become intertwined, and they have the opportunity to assess each others' needs firsthand. For example, elderly widows in the same neighborhood often have exact knowledge of each other's well-being through direct observation made during daily visits to chat and trade resources. The more exchanges one is involved in, the more visible one becomes. Conversely, few people have the opportunity to observe the needs of an individual who, for whatever reasons, is not involved in regular exchanges.

In order for the system of exchange to operate dependably, helpers must be held accountable for their actions. Public accountability, the third element in the creation of security, is the degree to which an older person's helpers, whether kin or non-kin, are subject to scrutiny and examination by others whose opinions matter. Also inherent in this concept is the idea that helpers receive either some sort of social regard, recognition for their good efforts, or censure for their lack of performance. An individual's public reputation as a potential partner in exchange derives from the opinions held by others. Gossip and comments about poor performances may cause others to be wary of involvement with an unreliable individual.

People who have "bought into" the system of exchange by making contributions through the years, wish to protect their investment. They seem aware that the integrity of the system depends on people honoring their commitments to each other. As one woman put it, "I'm real good to them (old people), because heaven knows, I might be in the same place myself some

day, and I would want people to do the same for me."

Public scrutiny operates best within geographically distinct communities where people know they may actually have to depend on those with whom they they built relationships through the years. However, the same sort of scrutiny can operate in social circumstances, such as the dispersed personal networks of individuals living in the city, wherein people are interconnected and have a chance to observe each others' performances. For instance, people in the same neighborhood have a chance to observe each other, as well as the visiting pattern of kin of an older person living in the neighborhood.

The two case studies presented below show how the cultural strategies of deferred and immediate exchange are employed by two childless older men to create levels of security commensurate with their resources and personal preferences. Mr. Avery has used his modest resources wisely by giving significant gifts to create a large and reliable network of helpers. Mr. Elder, whose means are meager but adequate, has rejected this conventional path. He used the immediate exchange strategy to preserve his highly autonomous and individual way of life.

Mr. Avery

Mr. Avery, a black man in his late 80's, lives alone in a rural comunity just outside the city. He has maintained ties to this community all of his life. He was born here on the 40 acre farm which his father, a former slave, bought an acre at a time. In his early adulthood, Avery worked as a bellhop in white hotels around the state. Later, he landed a job as a houseboy, bartender, and chauffeur for a wealthy family. Easy access to liquor in his employer's household led to a drinking problem. When he was

dismissed, he returned to farm his father's land.

Although his income is below the poverty level, Avery is considered well-off in his community. This is because he has a tidy savings account of several thousands of dollars which he obtained from the sale to developers of parcels of his inherited land (now fetching $1,100 an acre). He lives on Social Security and interest from his savings.

He was married young to a "good and quiet woman" but their relationship was strained by his frequent absences and his liaisons with other women. He and his wife hoped for, but never had children together. (However, Avery had two daughters outside of his marriage, each by a different woman. One of these daughters he openly acknowledges. The other he describes as, "my daughter nobody knows about." Avery's wife also had a daughter by a previous union. Avery sometimes refers to her as "my daughter" but more often as "my wife's daughter." None of these children were raised "in the home" by Avery and his wife.)

The stepdaughter is the most attentive of Avery's kin. She makes weekly trips from town bringing dishes of food and frequently invites Avery to her home for meals. One of her sons is the executor of Avery's estate, of which she herself stands to inherit half.

He expresses amusement at the helpfulness of his stepdaughter, whom he figures wants to keep him "puffed up" in order to insure her part in the inheritance. Her legal claim is weak and depends on Avery's continuing good will towards her. Avery contributes to her insecurity by frequently hinting that he could change the terms

of the will at any time. Avery has much less contact with his acknowledged biological daughter; nevertheless, he has provided for her in his will. He has not included his unacknowledged biological daughter in his will, although he sometimes gives her money during his infrequent visits.)

Avery's other important contacts are with his neighbors, both black and white, in his community. His generosity is well-known. In a community where cash is scarce, he is frequently approached for loans. Usually he is willing to loan money, often to people who could not obtain loans through conventional channels. He is generous with his other resources as well. The house of the widow just up the road stands on an acre of land given her by Avery. His neighbors can rely on him for rides to the city (to do shopping, go to the doctor, etc.) in his new model car. His church will receive a $1,000 bequest upon his death.

As a result, his neighbors are attentive and his requests taken seriously. The children of the widow are always available to run errands, and the widow herself will cook special foods for him. He can ask a white neighbor who owes him money to plow up the land for his spring garden. When he drives his car down to the local crossroad and sits in front of the shop there, he is greeted and acknowledged by most of the residents of the community, both black and white. Although he lives in a humble, ramshackle home, he has the trappings which matter to him--a nice car, a respected position in his church, and the attentiveness of distant kin and neighbors.

Avery can count on a considerable amount of concern over the long run from his community as well as his stepdaughter and her

family. He recalls during a recent illness, that many people were mobilized to bring him meals, take him to the doctor, and check on him daily. Recently, several people (most notably his stepdaughter and his wife's sister) have been urging him to move from his home, which he can no longer adequately care for, into one of their homes. While their motives may not be entirely pure (his residence would mean additional monthly income and a stronger claim on his inheritance for one of them), they would look after him adequately until his death.

Mr. Elder

Mr. Elder, a white man in his 70's, lives alone in a two-room apartment in an older section of the city. Mr. Elder relocated here from St. Louis about eight years ago, after his official retirement from the "antique and junque" business. He lives on minimal Social Security and a small income from his continued business dealings.

Mr. Elder came from a Jewish family which had emigrated from Poland early in this century. The family settled in St. Louis, where Elder's highly-educated father was forced to take up cigar making (in the family's basement) and give violin lessons to support his family. Elder himself did not take well to formal schooling; to help his family he quit after the fourth grade and went to work in the packing department of a thread factory. Eventually, he went into partnership with one of his cousins in the junk business, which for the next forty years was his passion and profession. After his cousin left the business, Elder lived alone in the back of a succession of small shops. His days were spent working in the shop

and scouring other shops and auctions for items for resale. Every evening, he went to the movies alone. This routine was interrupted only by a four-year stint as a postal clerk for the army during World War II. Soon after he returned home, his father died, and Elder, as the only unmarried son, assumed responsibility for the upkeep of his elderly mother, whom he supported financially until her death.

His retirement is essentially a continuation of his earlier life pattern. He runs a mail-order, secondhand book business from his apartment and spends a great deal of time searching flea markets and yard sales for his stock. Each night is spent watching television from 6:00 p.m. until 11:30 p.m. (TV has taken the place of the movies). He is very satisfied with this routine and describes himself simply, "I'm just an old bachelor and this is my life." He explains further that close ties would get in the way of pursuing his life as a self-described "loner."

He has no intimate contact in the city. He doesn't know any of his neighbors in the apartment building and has no telephone ("Who would call me?" he asks). His dealings at the flea markets bring him into contact with a number of people, but he knows only a few of them by name. He knows only one person well, Mr. Jones, whom he happened to know because of their association in the junk business in St. Louis. When Mr. Jones retired and moved East, he casually suggested that Elder might also be interested in the same city because it was clean, relatively free of crime, and had good prospects for the secondhand trade. Having no strong attachments to relatives, Elder accepted Jones' suggestion.

Elder uses the immediate exchange strategy to maintain distance from others and preserve his personal autonomy. For instance, he does not own a car and is regularly given rides to local flea markets by Jones. As repayment, Elder calculates a fixed percentage of his daily profits and pays Jones at the end of each day. In spite of their long association, Mr. Elder describes Mr. Jones simply as a "business acquaintance."

Elder does worry about what might become of him if he were unable to take care of himself. His own mother spent her last years miserably in a nursing home. He has a horror of becoming a "vegetable," and ending up in a nursing home himself. He has made out a Living Will, a written document requesting that no extraordinary efforts be made to prolong his life, should he ever become incapacitated.

As long as Elder is in good health (except for a little arthritis, his health is excellent), he can continue his solitary way of life. However, an accident or sustained illness would make his situation precarious. His only relatives (an ailing sister and some nieces and nephews) live hundreds of miles away. No one in his local social sphere knows him well or is heavily obligated enough to care for him very long. Most likely he would end up in a public institution; his Living Will shows that he would prefer death to this outcome.

Analysis of Case Studies

The elements of exchange reputation, social visibility, and public accountability of helpers are evaluated in an assessment of each man's potential security. At the time of the study, neither Mr. Avery nor Mr. Elder yet had to depend extensively on others, but if they did, the projected degree of security would be quite different for each.

In addition, their cases provide material for the discussion of other pertinent issues concerning childless older people: the impact of early life events and decisions on the pattern of marriage and the family; the culturally sanctioned alternatives available to people who cannot follow the usual patterns; and the mechanisms within the larger community for reinforcing the responsibility of those obligated to the childless older person.

Both men's old ages have been profoundly influenced by the circumstances and accidents of their early lives, particularly economic uncertainty. In Mr. Avery's case, the occupations open to him as a black man--bellhop in hotels and houseboy in a wealthy home--provided a minimal living and separated him from his wife and home community for long periods. In addition, his family life was shaped by the fact that he and his wife never had children. Mr. Elder's early life was likewise shaped by poverty, forcing his early withdrawal from school and entrance into the job market. The interruption of the War and his assumption of responsibility for his elderly mother also influenced his decision to remain single.

Two major cultural alternatives were available to these men. One alternative, not pursued by either of them, would have been to raise or foster children other than their own (Mr. Avery's relationship with his

stepdaughter developed later, after she became an adult). The other major cultural alternative is to use reciprocal exchange strategies in a manner which obligates people in other kinds of relationships.

Mr. Avery has chosen the latter path. He has enhanced his exchange reputation by making his resources available to his community. Although by objective criteria, he would be considered poor he has managed his resources well. Through constant back-and-forth exchanges and significant gifts, he has made others highly obligated to him. His generosity, his lifelong ties to his community, his membership in established community institutions (particularly his church), and his frequent informal contacts with his neighbors, have all contributed to his high social visibility. His needs and condition can be readily assessed by the community members who see him daily. Likewise, those obligated to him have their behavior subject to public scrutiny by the rest of the community. Failure to provide returns (such as defaulting on a loan made by Mr. Avery) would at the least provoke gossip, and could possibly result in ostracism of the negligent party from the system of exchange.

Mr. Elder has taken a very different approach, fitting with his more limited resources and personal preference for autonomy. His exchanges are immediate and instrumental in nature, rather than delayed and personal. He has rejected the deferred exchange strategy as a mean of deepening his relationships with others; rather, his habitual mode of exchange, immediate repayment, signals to others his desire for distance rather than closeness. Likewise, his solitary habits mean his social visibility is low. Although he comes in contact with many people as he makes his rounds at flea markets and secondhand stores, his interactions are mimimal. No one, with the exception of Mr. Jones, has a chance to regularly assess his situation and

well-being. Mr. Jones is not linked in any significant sense to Mr. Elder's other superficial acquaintances; they would not hold each other accountable for his condition.

These two case studies illustrate how the management of resources and personal preferences interact in the creation of security in old age. These two old men have employed existing cultural strategies surrounding reciprocal exchange in almost opposite ways based on their lifelong preferences for intimacy and involvement. Their choice of exchange strategies conveys precise messages to others about the degree of interpersonal commitment each desires. They are on opposite poles of a continuum of involvement; most other people fall somewhere in between.

Depending on their resources and inclinations, the fourteen childless people of this study (Mr. Avery and Mr. Elder included), have to a greater or lesser degrees made up for their lack of culturally sanctioned relationships with children. The four among them who are still married lean most heavily on their spouses.[2] The dynamics of using reciprocity as a means of creating substitute relationships is clearest among the ten unmarried people (six single, either never married or divorced long ago, and four widowed). These people have had to turn outward if they are to create security through their relationships with others. Substitutions for children in order of preference are: siblings, in-laws (relatives of former spouses), stepchildren, and nieces and nephews. If these categories are unavailable, then friends, neighbors, and other community members can be more intensely cultivated. None of the substitute categories of helpers, no matter how intensely cultivated, are under the same strong cultural proscription of obligation as are children. But if exchanges have gone on for a long time, these others are unlikely to abandon the childless older person.

Mr. Avery is a clear example of how someone lacking primary kin can create alternatives through extensive deferred exchange. Mr. Elder is unique among these childless older people in his predominant use of immediate exchange as a means of preserving almost complete personal autonomy. He may represent a category of never-married older men (documented in other research--see Gubrium, 1975; Stephens, 1976), who value personal freedom above all else. Although there is a wide range of differences in the amount of intimacy desired, most people seek to bring themselves closer to others. Whatever their individual perceptions of independence, these childless older people are using the cultural system of meaning surrounding the significance of reciprocity to create individually acceptable alternatives to the state of childlessness.

Creation of Security: The Childless vs. Those with Children

The cultural tools for creating secruity are the same for both those with children and those without. Participation in deferred exchanges over long time periods is the primary means of building security for both groups. Both groups have available the cultural mechanism of reciprocal exchange in building obligation over the lifetime.

While responsibility of offspring is the cultural ideal, the reality is considerably more complex. Children and parents must interact in patterns of reciprocity to reinforce and nurture their already intense relationship. As Blenkner (1965) has pointed out, it is necessary for both grown children and parents to mature and develop in their roles vis-à-vis each other, if children are to be able to accept their parents as real people and fulfill the demands for help and support their aging entails. Patterns of reciprocity and support are essential to this family developmental process.

Childless older people differ from those with children because they lack the deep, culturally-sanctioned commitment in relationships with children. For them, the task is similar but more difficult. They must commit others who by definition have a much lower inherent sense of obligation. The cultural mechanism is the same, the use of reciprocal exchanges over the life span to create obligation and responsibility. Childless people must use them with more persistence and intensity in order to secure their futures. For the childless, the creation of security is not different in kind, only in degree.

Notes

1. For a complete discussion of this research, its objectives and methodology, see a longer article (Wentowski, "Reciprocity and the coping strategies of old people: cultural dimensions of network building") forthcoming in The Gerontologist.
2. Johnson and Catalano (1980) found the following patterns among the childless elderly. Childless married people depended mainly on their spouses, even when these spouses were old and sick themselves. Having developed few other resources, they were often in jeopardy at the death or institutionalization of a spouse. On the other hand, unmarried childless people (whether never married, divorced, or widowed for years) seemed to have anticipated the likelihood of dependency in old age and had developed substitute resources (distant kin or reliance on community agencies).

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